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# A BIBLE LESSON FOR MR. HERBERT SPENCER

BY GAIL HAMILTON.

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ONE hardly knows whether to be sorry or glad that Mr. Herbert Spencer has been caught napping. This gentle, modest Christian philosopher cannot create envy, but his attainments are so wide in scope, so far beyond the reach and the ambition of the commonalty that a solid bit of native ignorance in the midst of his learning does seem to humanize him—to bring him a little more within the sphere of our experience and sympathy.

At any rate Mr. Herbert Spencer has been caught napping, and napping, it must be confessed, in the very place where a good many of us have suspected he has been in the habit of going to sleep—with his head on the Bible ! I have always maintained, in season and out of season, Mr. Spencer's orthodoxy, both for substance of doctrine and sweet reasonableness of statement, and have met some harmless jeers therefor ; but I have never maintained that Mr. Spencer ranked himself as orthodox. The reason is plain. He has never gone deep enough into the Bible to know what orthodoxy really is ! He apparently took his allotted share of Bible instruction along with the rest of his early routine education and stopped there, just as a great many inferior men have done ; and if these men, with Mr. Spencer at their head, would let the Bible alone and stick to their *moutons* for vivisection, we would let them alone and stick to ours.

No universal obligation rests on men to be Biblical scholars any more than to be electricians. But, if being no electricians, they touch a live wire ignorantly, they are dead men. And when a student never so profound in any or all other departments would set a careless foot upon the science of sciences, Theology, as if that could be disposed of with a hop, skip, and jump, he must be gently and promptly put aside with rubber gloves, just

to save his life, even though he be the beloved disciple who knows himself only as a Prophet of Evolution.

In the chapter on Veracity, in "The Principles of Ethics," Mr. Spencer executes a wild war dance before the other prophets and apostles. "We have proof in the Bible," he says, "that, apart from the lying which constituted false witness, and was to the injury of a neighbor, there was among the Hebrews but little reprobation of lying."

It might have been well here to note that the exception signified an immense advance on the other wild and semi-civilized tribes whom he cites. Of the Dakotas, of the Mishmis, of the Kirghis, of the Fijians, of the Ugandas, of the tribes of Central Asia, of Central America, of the Philippine Islands, whom he summons to the bar of moral judgment, he predicates no saving clause. Is it not worthy of note, if not of scientific investigation, that while all these tribes lied as a business enterprise, as a legitimate means of attack and defence, as the ordinary way of getting a living, one obscure tribe in Western Asia incorporated into their very earliest code a law forbidding *malicious* lying, injurious lying, false witness *against* a neighbor? If we, in the nineteenth century, if we English and American citizens lived up to the standard held aloft by this half-civilized people, if we had completely abandoned the sort of lying which this tribe distinguished itself from its neighbors by reprobating—lying to the injury of a neighbor—a large part of the machinery of our civilization might be allowed to fall into disuse and our spears become tuning-forks to set our lives to a key of celestial harmony.

Mr. Spencer deduces from all his tribes the general observation that it is the presence or absence of despotic rule which tends to prevalent falsehood or prevalent truth; that tribes which were subject to coercion lied as a matter of self-defence against their tyrants, while tribes that were governed by an elected council or by the majority of an assembly, and were inspired by the spirit of equality, were truthful, and that however annoying is the mendacity of free tribes, the mendacity of slave tribes far surpasses it.

But the Hebrew code, the great exceptional new law of truth, a law so high that we have not yet attained unto it, was made, adopted and observed by a race of slaves. Of all the tribes and people cited by Mr. Spencer for truth or for falsehood, savage or

semi-civilized, ancient or modern, Mexicans, Hindoos, Hottentots, Khonds, Kolis, Bodo, Dhimals, Todas, Hos, Puluyans, Wood-Veddahs, Ostiahs, Samoieds, Sontals, Bengalis, Kois, Râmósís, Saracens, Slavs, Avais, Aquitanians,—not one of them all has left any discernible mark upon us. Of many of them the name is not even known ; while the one race of shepherd slaves has furnished, has at least fashioned, the backbone of our civilization. The code which it adopted when it came up out of four hundred years of slavery is the groundwork of our morality and our religion. It was wrought by the finger of God on tables of stone for the betterment of an ancient, semi-civilized, wandering tribe, according to their proud patriotic record. Mr. Herbert Spencer may scout the miracle, but he may see its continuous progress every Sunday morning, if he will walk into the churches of his own England ; for, behold, the finger of God still writes on tables of stone the same ten commandments, fronting the great congregation, who still repeat them as devoutly as did the original Bedouins, with the earnest prayer, “ Lord have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law ! ”

It is not necessary to be a Congregationalist or an Episcopalian or an Agnostic, but this is a fact just as much as a serpent mound or a megatherium or an archæological potsherd. We may reject any and every particular philosophy of the fact, but the fact remains—to be accounted for.

This, assuming the truth of Mr. Spencer’s statement, that with one exception “ there was among the Hebrews but little reprobation of lying.” The truth or falsity of that statement is not to my purpose. It is to my purpose that when Mr. Spencer brings forward his “ proof from the Bible ” to sustain his statement, he displays so very juvenile an acquaintance with his textbook that one is moved to go back indeed to the *First Principles of Theology* and ask him, tentatively : “ Can you tell, my child, who made you ? ”

“ Indeed, it would be remarkable were it otherwise,” says Mr. Spencer, “ considering that Jahveh set the example ; as when, to ruin Ahab, he commissioned ‘ a lying spirit ’ ( *I Kings*, xxii., 22 ) to deceive his prophets. ”

The passage which Mr. Spencer cited is this : “ And the Lord said unto him, ‘ Wherewith ’ ? And he said, ‘ I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ And he

said, 'Thou shalt persuade him, and prevail also : go forth, and do so.'"

This is a "proof" just as much as many of the old "proof-texts" which used to be attached to our Sunday-school questions and answers were proof of the doctrines they were set against, but it is surprising to find it serving a scholar's purpose outside of Sunday-schools. It is a "proof" hardly more than the "top-knot, come down !" (Matt., xxiv., 17,) of the text-books was a proof that women are forbidden by Scripture to wear wired bows on their bonnets.

I quote the picturesque and spirited narrative from which Mr. Spencer deduces nothing but false witness against "a race-character which evolved such a conception of a deity's principles."

"And they continued three years without war between Syria and Israel. And the King of Israel said unto his servants : 'Know ye that Ramoth in Gilead is ours, and we be still, and take it not out of the hand of the King of Syria ?'"—just as Bismarck, doubtless, spoke to Emperor William about Alsace and Lorraine in the hands of Louis Napoleon. "And it came to pass in the third year that Jehoshaphat, the King of Judah, came down to the King of Israel. And he said unto Jehoshaphat" (what every newspaper man in Europe is on the watch to hear the young German Emperor say when he goes a-visiting) : "Wilt thou go with me to battle to Ramoth-gilead ?" And as King Umberto might, in the enthusiasm of a strong and desired alliance, reply to William, Jehoshaphat answered the King of Israel : "I am as thou art, my people as thy people, my horses as thy horses."

And Jehoshaphat, who appears to have been a truly religious and orthodox man as far as policy would permit, and who liked to have the blessing of the clergy and the sentiment of the church with him in any enterprise, said to the King of Israel : "Inquire, I pray thee, at the word of the Lord to-day." Then the King of Israel—with the prompt alacrity of that ambitious colonel who, not willing to be outdone in anything, detailed forty men for baptism, to match the revival fruits in another regiment—gathered the prophets together, about *four hundred* men, and said unto them : "Shall I go against Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall I forbear ?" And the servile crew who cared for nothing, but the buttered side of their bread in hand, and who knew well which side that was, answered to a man : "Go up ; for the Lord shall

deliver it into the hand of the King." Jehoshaphat, familiar with true prophets, gave one look at the ragamuffin crowd, and showed what he thought of them by his first disgusted question to King Ahab : " Is there not here a *prophet of the Lord, besides*, that we might inquire of him ? "

Not a word of defence for his rabble four hundred did the conscious Ahab proffer, but confessed judgment in his naïve reply : " There *is* yet one man, Micaiah the son of Imlah, by whom we may inquire of the Lord : but I hate him ; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil." And Jehoshaphat said gently : " Let not the Kingsay so." And the King of Israel called an officer, and said : " Bring Micaiah here instantly ! "

Eager to embrace every opportunity for displaying his magnificence, and hoping, no doubt, to overawe the one recalcitrant prophet, Ahab made a stately ceremonial of the occasion. The two kings put on their robes of state and splendor and sat each on his throne, which had been placed in a large open park at the entrance of the city for the better accommodation of the immense assembly. And all the prophets prophesied before them. And Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah, not content with the emphasis of reiteration, made himself horns of iron and accentuated his falseness by crying : " Thus saith the Lord : ' With these shalt thou push the Syrians until thou hast consumed them.' " And all the fool prophets roared in emulous unison : " Go up to Ramoth-gilead and prosper : for the Lord shall deliver it into the King's hand."

And the messenger that was gone to call Micaiah, being very friendly towards the great, true man, and desirous of his welfare, spoke unto him, saying : " Behold, now, the words of the prophets declare good unto the King with one mouth ; let thy word, I pray thee, be like the word of one of them and speak that which is good. What is the use of setting up one disagreeable truth against four hundred pleasant lies ? You will only get yourself into trouble and benefit nobody. Let not my lord be always in a minority of one. It is simply throwing away your vote."

And Micaiah said : " As the Lord liveth, what the Lord saith unto me that will I speak." And his friend saw that Micaiah was impracticable and he held his peace. So he came to the King.

And when all the gates of etiquette had been duly passed, the

king said unto him in his most august manner, "Micaiah, shall we go against Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall we forbear?" With a meaning glance at the friendly messenger who had advised compromise, and who stood near sorrowfully awaiting the result, Micaiah cried with ironical emphasis, assuming even the courtier tones of the pseudo-prophets: "Go and prosper; for the Lord shall deliver it into the hand of the King."

The King keenly felt and resented the mimicry which he was too clever not to see, and cried angrily to the bold prophet: "How many times shall I adjure thee that thou tell me nothing but that which is true in the name of the Lord?" A very pious exclamation, but Ahab must have forgotten what he had in a moment of frankness said to his visitor about the prophet.

And Micaiah, throwing off the mask of satire, said with the solemnity of foreboding: "I saw all Israel scattered upon the hills, as sheep that have not a shepherd."

"Did I not tell them that he would prophecy no good concerning me, but evil," said the King, turning impatiently to his guest.

But Micaiah, not heeding the interruption, not permitting interruption, gazed upon the deluded people and the deluding priests, and upon the wayward king both deluded and deluding, and said in a voice that compelled attention, "Hear thou therefore the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne and all the host of heaven standing by him, on his right hand and on his left. And the Lord said, 'Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' And one said on this manner, and another said on that manner. And there came forth a spirit, and stood before the Lord, and said: 'I will persuade him.' And the Lord said unto him: 'Wherewith?' And he said, 'I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And he said, 'Thou shalt persuade him, and prevail also; go forth and do so.' Now therefore, behold, the Lord hath put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets, and the Lord hath spoken evil concerning thee."

I know that I have spoiled the beauty of the old, old story, but Mr. Spencer compelled me to do so by refusing to understand it without a modern, not to say vulgar, pigment.

Who does not see in this an argument, a solemn warning in the guise of a parable, to dissuade a rash king from going out

to certain disaster? This is a story of Jahveh setting the example of lying! The whole burden of the tale is honor and reprobation of lying. "These men, prophets?" says the intrepid preacher in their very presence and in the presence of the allied kings: "Then they are the prophets of a lying spirit and not of the God of truth. These foul tongues divine? Then the Lord God Almighty has discarded His holy ones and has employed liars." It is an explanation, fanciful in form but embodying a real and deplorable truth. The incredible spectacle of four hundred pretended prophets leading a great king to his overthrow can be only by the inspiration of the devil.

Mr. Spencer does not understand it, but the four hundred understood. That Head Centre of falsehood, who could not be content with words, but must fashion to himself horrors of emphasis, understood.

Zedekiah, the son of Chenaanah, went near and smote Micaiah on the cheek and said with a bitter sneer: "Which way went the Spirit of the Lord from me to speak unto thee?" If Micaiah was simply telling them that Jahveh set them the example of lying, what was there for Zedekiah to be angry about? In those lying peoples among whom Mr. Spencer places the Hebrews, he tells us that a ready and clever liar is a valuable acquisition, that a successful liar is considered a smart, clever fellow, and rather admired, and that lying was tacitly or openly applauded. If then the Hebrew four hundred, lying as fast as their tongues could wag, under the stimulus of the kings' presence, who lived by their lies, were unexpectedly buttressed by the testimony of the great reformer justifying their lies by citing the example of Jahveh, why should Zedekiah have been moved to go up and slap his face?

What Mr. Spencer has done is to take out one item from a *reductio ad absurdum* in story form, the favorite form of a few thousand years ago, and state it as a categorical proposition—which he never would have done the second time if he had enrolled himself as a member in good and regular standing of our Washington Bible Class!

But he does it a second time, and a third time, time, times and a half. It is his stereotyped mode of "proof," his satisfactory exegesis. He slips down a thousand years and impales St. Paul on the same unthinking pen. "Nor do we find the stand-



ard much changed in the days of Christ and after ; instance the case of Paul, who, apparently rather piquing himself on his 'craft and guile,' elsewhere defends his act by contending that the truth of God hath more abounded through my lie unto his glory " (Romans, iii., 7.).

Writing on the 8th of November I may not inaptly say that if Paul was the Republican Presidential candidate and Mr. Herbert Spencer a Democratic stump-speaker, I fear even his noble work in the past would not prevent partisan newspapers from describing him as the "Champion liar" of the campaign, which only shows how much harsher is political than theological debate, for Mr. Spencer is no liar, even when he does not speak the truth. If he is not a saint, he is, as old Father Taylor used to say of his son-in-law, a very sweet sinner. He does not misread Paul for the purposes of election or any self-seeking. He simply skims along the surface, assuming that there is nothing worth while under the surface. If he would give half the study to the Scriptures of the Jews that he gives to the Scriptures of the rocks he would not shoot so wide of the mark. If St. Paul had been a Mesozoic lizard Mr. Spencer would know all about him. But even as an exponent or sign-manual of evolution, Paul has a distinct and appreciable value, just as truly as if he were the *Anisichnus Deweyanus* gamboling on the micaceous sand a hundred and thirty feet below the earth's surface a hundred and thirty millions of years ago, and for that reason alone Mr. Spencer ought not to slur him over with such a twist of the pen !

Come hither, therefore, learned philosopher, sit down in our Bible class like a little child and learn that Paul did nothing of the sort. Obey the law of the half-civilized and cease to bear false witness against your neighbor, even though he be only a man and not a megalosaurus.

The early Christian Corinthians were very, very early Christians—just rescued from Paganism, always falling back and having to be pulled up again into a half decent Christianity by main force. In the present case they seem to have been slandering Paul right and left till his apostolic reputation and future influence were involved, and he was not simply stung but forced to a spirited self-defence. His natural Christian modesty and the necessity of proclaiming his integrity clashed, and now the one and now the other was uppermost.

"I am become a fool in glorying; ye have compelled me: for I ought to have been commended of you and not found fault with. For in nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I am not one of the original twelve. Were not all the signs of an apostle wrought among you? What is it wherein ye were inferior to other churches, I should like to know, except that I myself was not burdensome to you. You paid me no salary, as other churches do their ministers. Forgive me this wrong." Does Mr. Spencer need the explanation attached? "This is sarcasm."

"You say," continued Paul, "'Be it so, I did not burden you,' nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you with guile. I did not receive a salary or take up a collection, but, being crafty, I got it out of you indirectly!"

"How, will you please to tell me, did I make a gain of you by any of them whom I sent unto you? I desired Titus, and with him I sent a brother. Did Titus make a gain of you? Did Titus get any money out of you?"

"Do not imagine I am excusing myself to you. I speak before God, in the name of Christ, and I am speaking for your sake that you may not make such fools of yourselves, such mean and petty and clamorous fools, that I shall be ashamed of you when I come, and shall have to rebuke you so sternly that you will hate me!"

And to read this Mr. Spencer lays aside not only his philosophical acumen, but his common understanding, and sits down like a stolid school-boy on the lowest bench and reads with the school-boy's unthinking, mechanical monotone, "And—be-ing craft-y, I-caught-you-with-guile." There would be just as much of Paul in his rendering if he read it backward: "Guile-with-you-caught-I-crafty-being-and."

He does precisely the same with the Romans. Paul considered himself eminently the Apostle to the Gentiles, not one of the original twelve, but a late comer, and therefore proper for the Gentiles, who were not the original "chosen people."

In many hand-to-hand fights he grappled with the Jews, maintaining and defending the right of his Gentiles to the Kingdom of Heaven—battling the Jewish claim to superiority and the exclusive possession of Divine favor. With his usual intellectual agility and dramatic tendency he takes both sides of the case and handles them with equal vivacity. Unhappily Mr. Spencer does not cut around corners fast enough to keep both Paul and his

imaginary antagonist always in sight, and comes to grief thereby. Seeing only Paul ahead he supposes Paul is making a dead straight line and must be talking to himself.

“Behold,” says Paul, pouring forth his rapid and redundant eloquence on his bullet-headed Jews, “Thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God, and art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a teacher of babes. Thou, therefore, which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? Thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal? If you break every commandment in the Decalogue and the Gentile keeps every commandment, are you going to consider yourself a better man than the Gentile, simply because you are born a Jew? He is not a Jew which is one outwardly. He is a Jew which is one inwardly, obeying God in the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter.

“Do you say: ‘What advantage, then, hath the Jew?’ I answer: ‘Much every way: chiefly because unto them were committed the oracles of God—these same commandments which you boast of holding, having received as a trust from God, yet which you spend your life in breaking. For what, if some did not believe? Shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect? On the contrary, the faith of God often shines all the more strongly against the shadows of man’s unbelief.’

“Ah! now you think you have caught me. Now you argue: ‘If our unrighteousness illustrates the righteousness of God, we are doing a good work, and it is unrighteous in God to punish us for it.’ God forbid! for then all wrong would have to go unpunished. ‘Yes,’ you persist,—for I speak as a man, as one of you,—‘if the truth of God is all the clearer as seen against my lie, I maintain that my lie is a good thing, and I ought not to be judged a sinner because I tell it.’

“Oh, no! my beloved but erring brethren and hearers, wrong—all wrong. That is just what I am slanderously reported to teach, but what I earnestly repudiate and denounce—that it is right to do evil that good may come—that it is righteous to lie because God overrules it to the cause of truth. I teach nothing of the sort. I teach that the only right thing for Jew and Gentile alike is truth—is righteousness.”

And this, this very self-same slanderous report which Paul flatly denies, Mr. Spencer blandly repeats, and repeats it on

Paul's authority ! The acts which Paul vigorously disproves and condemns Mr. Spencer says that Paul defends. In the scorning and scoring of the Corinthian sophistry, Mr. Spencer sees only its adoption and use.

It is incredible that the great saint of the new departure in Judaism should be traduced by the great saint of modern evolution, when they ought to be brothers in unity. In point of real character I do not know that there is anything to choose. In certain very trying circumstances Mr. Spencer has shown himself a perfect Christian, and if I knew as much about him as I do about Saint Paul I dare say I should find him just as good—not so fiery in temperament, not so impetuous in style, not so irresistible in his current of thought or action (suppose the enthusiasm of investigation necessitates an entirely different mental constitution from the enthusiasm of humanity)—but just as single-hearted, just as truth-seeking in regard to the action of structure on function, as was Paul over the action of Jewish law on Gentiles.

But that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth also philosophers, even one thing befalleth them—the necessity of knowing what they are talking about. I abate no whit of positiveness regarding Mr. Spencer's orthodoxy as soon as Mr. Spencer thinks it worth his while to learn what orthodoxy is, or to render the Bible as accurately as he renders a bird track. But, until that happy hour arrives, so often as the ever-recurring question thunders down from the Spirit of Truth, 'Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge ? thousands of his most ardent disciples will rise and answer, shame-faced, but unwavering, "Herbert Spencer, God bless him !"

GAIL HAMILTON.